

“Changing Coastal Environment Influences Extension Efforts”

Waterfront and other coastal property is undergoing some rapid changes that can affect the quality of life for residents. In Santa Rosa County for example, over half of the population lives within a mile of major surface waters - the Gulf, sound, bay, river or bayou. In the southern portion of the county, the peninsula - a narrow strip of land that averages about 1 mile wide by 20 miles long, has a population of over 40,000.

Water quality is a big concern in these areas. Shallow wells are used by many residents for irrigation purposes, and some are experiencing salt water intrusion and death of landscape plants. Current landscape fertilization practices are sometimes blamed for introducing excessive nitrogen and phosphorus into surface waters. And, the plant species used, and their placement is believed to be contributing to excessive shoreline erosion.

These are just a few of the complex issues that are involved in coastal development and the Extension Service has responded by offering education programs and services to coastal residents.

Well water testing has been offered to residents of Santa Rosa County for over 10 years. Using an electrical conductivity meter we can determine the level of soluble salts in a sample. Results can be provided in parts per million or in deciSiemens per meter. This is a quick and easy way to determine if water from a well is safe for irrigating a landscape. The Extension office in your county can provide further information about water testing. Some private laboratories also offer this service.

A weekly plant clinic is offered to residents of South Santa Rosa County. This is a “barber shop” style clinic, and is provided with the assistance of Master Gardener volunteers. Clinic time is each Tuesday beginning at 9:00 a.m. and runs until 1:00 p.m. It is held at the South Santa Rosa Service Center, 5819 Gulf Breeze Parkway.

A monthly “Gardening for Newcomers” class is underway. Here we offer lectures on a variety of gardening subjects that are geared to coastal conditions. Subjects so far have included general gardening tips, growing perennials and pest control in the landscape. Classes are held from 6:30 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. on the last Tuesday of each month at the Good Shepard Lutheran Church east of Gulf Breeze. Please call ahead to register.

Research is also underway in order to help determine the effects of various lawn fertilization practices on waterfront lawns. Two home owners on Santa Rosa Sound have allowed us to establish replicated plots where we have applied several rates of both slow release and quick release fertilizer products. All methods are being monitored by both soil and leaf tissue sampling.

This will likely be a 2 year study. We hope to obtain information that will be of value to residents as well as protect water quality. Such a study is only possible with the assistance and cooperation of many interested people. Buck Thackeray, Dennis Snyder and other Master Gardener volunteers are providing most of the work, which includes frequent sampling, and Dr. Laurie Trenholm, turfgrass specialist at the University of Florida is providing design and technical help.

I know of no similar fertility study that has been done, especially in home lawns. We are attempting to determine if, or how much of the fertilizer is getting into water and how turfgrass can best be fertilized without a negative impact on water quality.

Our plans and programs continue to evolve as the County changes. This is specialized work because the special coastal environment demands it.

For additional information please contact the Santa Rosa Extension Office at (850) 623-3868 or (850) 939-1259, Ext. 1360 for South county residents or E-mail at (danm@co.santa-rosa.fl.us).

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